

Letter from Helen Keller to William Wade, December 5, 1899, with transcript

Strictly Confidential Keller Copy of a letter written to Mr. Wade by Helen Keller. The Braille business seems to be more satisfactorily stated here than in anything she has written.

A.M.S. 138 Brattle Street, Cambridge, December 5, 1899. My dear Mr. Wade:

How can I beat out on these keys what I have to say to you when my heart is so heavy with grief, and disappointment and rebellion at the cruel indignities, which you have showered upon me and those who are dear to me! My fingers will scarcely obey my will! I have loved you so truly and trustingly all these years, and looked up to you as a father. My heart has been too full of love and gratitude to hold even the suspicion of a doubt of your sincerity and affection for me. I knew two years ago that you took nearly, if not quite the same views as Mr. Gilman did, before and after I left his school; but I felt sure that you had been persuaded by him, and that in time you would see the mistake you were making, and be sorry for it. I thought your heart was true and generous, and I waited for the dear Heavenly Father to let the light of His beautiful truth shine upon the darkness that was in your mind; but, dear friend—I must still call you by the dear old name, though now it brings the bitter tears to my eyes, it is evident that you have now taken up your position among my enemies. How little did I dream, when I first knew you, that I should have an enemy, and least of all an enemy in you! and yet, as I sit here alone with my typewriter and my thoughts, I must acknowledge that I have three enemies, two of whom I loved as a little child, and shall always love, no matter what they do—I mean you and Mr. Anagnos. I have resolved to try to forget the wrongs you have both done me and my teacher, who is dearer to me than my life, and remember only the love and kindness you have shown us in the past. My third enemy is Mr. Gilman, and for him I feel only contempt and indignation. Do not imagine that I am a little child any longer, or that I speak the words of others. I speak for myself, I say what I do know and feel, and if God permits me to live, I shall one day

Library of Congress

speak words, which will make him and others like him wish that they had never attacked her, who is the inspiration of my life.

I am writing to you in this way, because Mr. Keith has just read to me your letter in the "Mentor." It is really outrageous, and I would not believe at first that you wrote it.

In the first place, as far as I know, there never was a "letter" by me published in the "New York World." Sometime ago, I think in October, Mr. Hitz sent me a copy in braille of a portion of an article 3 in that paper; but it was neither a letter, nor a statement from me; it was a reporter's account of an interview with me, in which the statements were gathered from Mrs. Chamberlin, my mother, my teacher and myself. My teacher strenuously objected to Mr. Burrows' way of representing the subject; but he insisted that it would only make the account more interesting, if it was printed in the form of a conversation; and, as the published statements were on the whole correct, my friends did not think it necessary to criticise further the highly imaginative style of the World's reporter.

Now about the braille question. If you were in doubt as to any statement in that or any other article, why did you not write to me, Mr. Wade? Even if you thought my teacher would not read your letter to me, you could have had it put in braille, as you usually do, and I could have explained the difficulty to you. Instead of doing this, you go and print a very foolish and unreasonable attack on—well, I confess, it is rather hard to say whom, as your statements are wild, and seem to include all my friends and teachers. The facts are as follows: of course I have known American braille all my life; but, until the time of my examinations, I never knew the American notation in Algebra. It is true, I began to learn this system, when I took up the study of Algebra at the Gilman School; but, before I had any occasion to write in it, the book of Algebra, which you and Mr. Gilman 4 had ordered from England, came, and I at once learned and adopted the English system, and have used it throughout my work, and no other. Two days before the examinations, Mr. Vining sent me a braille copy of one of the previous examination papers; but to my dismay I found that it was in the American notation. I sat down immediately, and wrote to Mr. Vining,

Library of Congress

asking him to explain some of the signs. I received another copy, and a table of signs, by return mail and I went to work to learn the notation. However, on the night before the examinations, when I was struggling over some very complicated examples, I could not tell the combinations of bracket, brace and radicals. Both Mr. Keith and I were distressed and full of forebodings for the morrow; but we went over to the College a little before the examinations began, and had Mr. Vining explain more fully the method of writing such examples. Then I sat down at my desk, hoping that my memory would be my good friend, and serve me faithfully, which it did, though my work was very slow and troublesome.

As to my writing the American Algebraic notation for my teacher in Physics, I never did such a thing. I wrote for her the American alphabet and numerals with the signs for numbers. If she has a table of Algebraic signs, she never got it from me. Indeed, I do not believe that she has such a table. Mr. Gilman must be confusing the numerals with the signs in his ignorance of the braille systems. Besides, I did not then understand Algebra, and, even if I had, I should not have had any use for it in the little I had of Physics while I was there.

Now, although my letter is already too long, yet there is one more subject, on which you need to be enlightened. I have never in my life had more careful, or thorough or methodical teaching than under Mr. Keith. I have regular hours for study and recitation, and under his guidance the most difficult subjects have become clear and interesting for me. There are none of the annoyances and fruitless struggles, which inevitably arise when a deaf-blind person tries to study with a lot of hearing and seeing pupils; and there is no time wasted in having explanations, which are given to others, and which I do not need myself, spelled into my weary hand.

Lastly, I implore you, with my tears, not to attack my friends any more. I cannot bear it longer, and I know it will recoil upon you some day, if you do not check yourself now.

Library of Congress

My heart aches so I can write no more. With dear love, and a sad farewell, I am, and shall always be,

Affectionately your friend, Helen Keller.